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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature about transition from secondary to postsecondary settings for students with learning disabilities (LD) is presented. Reasons are offered for limited empirical longitudinal data about LD adolescents and adults. Studies of the impact of LD on adolescents are grouped into case studies, reports of specific materials or techniques, and discussions of philosophical issues. Trends in the transition literature are noted regarding service delivery models for LD adults in postsecondary settings, including specially trained peer tutors to help LD students in subject areas. Research about vocational rehabilitation's role with LD adolescents and adults is also discussed. The multi-faceted nature of the transition problem is stressed. (CL)

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A Selective Review of the Professional Literature Concerning the Transition Process of Learning Disabled Adolescents and Adults

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Abstract

This article is a brief discussion of the professional literature in the area of learning disabilities that applies to the transition process of LD secondary and postsecondary students. Fifty citations are explained under the subcategories of research about the impact of learning disabilities on adolescents, research about postsecondary service delivery models for LD adults, and research about vocational options for LD adolescents and adults. The author concludes that a great deal of information is currently being written about this topic, but it is still preliminary. More research needs to be done to define key concepts and effective materials or techniques in promoting successful transition for individuals with learning disabilities.

A Selective Review of the Professional Literature Concerning the Transition Process of Learning Disabled Adolescents and Adults

This article is a review of professional literature in the field of learning disabilities that focuses on transition. The purpose is to illuminate issues inherent in the critical transition period that LD adolescents and adults face when they move from secondary to postsecondary settings. The article will highlight information and materials germane specifically to those LD young adults who have the potential to successfully complete some kind of postsecondary education or training.

Authors within the literature are still in the preliminary stages of directly discussing effective service delivery models for LD individuals of different ages (Keogh, 1986; Smith, 1986). Many authors are starting to define key concepts to pursue when looking at techniques or materials that facilitate the successful transition for LD adolescents and adults (Price & Johnson, in press).

Limited empirical longitudinal data exists about learning disabilitied adolescents and adult populations. This may be true for a number of reasons.

First, learning disabilities are a relatively new field. The earliest children to be identified as LD have only recently become adults; Adults with learning disabilities were not seen as needing different services from children before the 1970s (Newill, Goyette & Fogarty, 1984).

Second, postsecondary agencies and institutions have only recently recognized LD as a distinct handicapping condition that required specific service delivery (Gray, 1981; Putnam, 1984).

Third, there are inherent problems within the literature because of the lack of agreement on an LD definition and the wide variety of procedures used for diagnosing the populations labeled "learning disabled" (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1986; Mellard & Deshler, 1984).

These factors have strongly influenced the material described under the following categories:

RESEARCH ABOUT THE IMPACT OF LEARNING DISABILITIES UPON ADOLESCENTS

A number of authors have looked at the impact of learning disabilities upon adolescents (Alley & Deshler, 1979; Cruickshank, Morse & Johns, 1980; Deshler, Schumacher, Lentz & Ellis, 1984).

This literature tends to fall into three major groups. One group looks primarily at the LD adolescent through testimonials or case studies (Cruickshank et al., 1980; Guildroy, 1981; President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, 1979).

The next group looks at specific techniques or materials that the author feels to have special value for the LD teenager. For example, Ensminger (1975) describes the development of self-concept, along with group interactions that stress grief reactions and parental counseling as important links in the advancement of the LD adolescent's growth. Cohen (1984, 1985) discusses the observable psychosocial factors, such as anxiety and low level depression, prevalent in his work with young learning disabled adults. Weiner (1975-1976) explains her pre-college curriculum taught in high school which stresses remedial reading and writing skills.

Another group of related literature discusses various philosophical issues to be explored when serving LD students in secondary settings. Deshler et al.

(1984) categorize the different characteristics of academic and cognitive interventions used with LD adolescents. Mori (1980) emphasizes the importance of career education for secondary students. Johnston (1984) describes different social and academic characteristics seen in teenagers with learning disabilities. All three of these groups overlap at times, but do not provide a clear consensus of effective ideas or techniques for secondary settings.

RESEARCH ABOUT SERVICE DELIVERY MODELS FOR LD ADULTS IN POSTSECONDARY SETTINGS

It is not surprising that those LD adults who do find their way into postsecondary institutions often find mixed services and support available to them (Ostertag, Baker, Howard & Best, 1982; Stalcup & Freeman, 1980). Even the brightest and most resilient LD student may be defeated when he or she moves from a high school resource room to a postsecondary school with limited service or support (Dexter, 1981).

A survey of the literature shows that even if a postsecondary facility provides services for the LD student, those services may be inadequate or inappropriate to meet his/her needs (Nayman, 1982; Seitz & Scheerer, 1983). For instance, Vogel (1982) points to LD college students who have average or above abilities but are in serious academic trouble after only one year and may either drop out or be asked to leave the institution owing to poor academic performance.

The LD services available in most postsecondary institutions vary greatly in terms of what they offer LD adults (Bumba & Goodin, 1986). These educational facilities generally offer various types of academic assistance but put less emphasis upon support for social and interpersonal factors which may be critical

areas for the success for LD adults (Barbaro, 1982; Minskoff, 1982; Ostertag et al., 1982).

The movement towards more effective support for LD postsecondary students is slowly changing, as community colleges, vocational schools and universities around the country are establishing a wide variety of innovative programs to meet the needs of LD students. Mick (1985) describes these emerging service delivery models as five different types: the tutorial model, the compensatory strategies model, the Adelphi model, the HELDS model, the linking or bridging model and special university courses.

For example, Barat College in Illinois utilizes specially trained peer tutors to assist LD students in subject areas (Vogel, 1982). Both Adelphi University's program and the University of Arkansas' program for LD women focus on social/interpersonal needs as well as academic skills (Barbaro, 1982; Johnson & Stepp, 1984). Rosenthal (1985) explains a successful program at Kingsborough Community College that uses special techniques to encourage goal setting and decision making. Projects and specific materials are just now being developed to help high school students find postsecondary programs to meet their unique needs and to make those postsecondary experiences a success (Strichart & Mangrum, 1985).

Of special interest is one of the newest trends in the transition literature. Various authors have written guidebooks for learning disabled students and their families. This material outlines in simple language how to choose a college or vocational school after high school graduation. Typical examples are by Sclafani & Lynch (1985) and HECLD (1986). Although this literature will need periodic updating to make sure the information is still

current, it can provide useful suggestions to clarify the complexities parents and LD students encounter when making critical transition decisions.

Another encouraging recent trend is illustrated by a major study currently underway in the California Community College system (Consortium for the Study of the Disabled in the California Community College System, 1983; Ostertag et al., 1982, 1986). Information from this study may be a significant addition to the body of knowledge about transition because it addresses critical issues in the field of learning disabilities with systematic, empirical data from all 106 California community college sites. The research includes exploration with assessment instruments, LD diagnostic strategies, teaching methodologies, and specific accommodations offered at the different institutions. Professionals involved with the study are also trying to create a consistent, workable definition for a LDA (i.e., Learning Disabled Average) postsecondary student.

RESEARCH ABOUT LD ADOLESCENT AND ADULT VOCATIONAL OPTIONS

The development of job skills is seen by many authors as a major link in the chain of events that assist a child with learning disabilities as she or he matures towards adulthood (Bencomo & Schafer, 1982; Mori, 1980).

This assumption is confirmed by the fact that many LD adults seem to encounter difficulties when coping with career demands, personal goals and daily living tasks. For example, The Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities at the University of Kansas interviewed 80 LD young adults to see how they felt about their lives. They were significantly less satisfied than their non-LD peers with their employment and contact with parents and friends (White, Schumacher, Warner, Alley & Deshler, 1980).

One group of professionals who can help LD individuals compensate for these difficulties are vocational rehabilitation counselors. Brown (1984) sees

the vocational counselor as holding the major responsibility for the employability of LD students. She emphasizes that the counselor can be a powerful liaison between the employer and the LD individual to advocate for appropriate accommodations in the workplace. Brown (cited in Brechin & Kemp, 1984) also states that some counselors who work with LD adults are so misinformed that they counsel their LD clients into vocational programs that are traditional choices for mentally retarded clients.

This lack of critical information is discussed by Brechin and Kemp (1984) in a survey of 169 rehabilitation professionals. The respondents expressed the following misconceptions about adults with learning disabilties:

> (a) that a learning disability only affects academics; (b) that all learning disabled people are hyperactive at some point in their lives; (c) little knowledge that there is a higher incidence of LD in males than in females; (d) little information that there may be a genetic connection with learning disabilities within individual families; (e) that generalization of specific skills may be especially difficult for LD adults; (f) that there may be other conditions or factors which may affect learning disability (such as emotional problems); and (g) that LD adults lack motivation.

Other authors put an emphasis on reducing the resistance of employers to hire LD individuals (McKinney & West, 1985) or advocate for specific cooperative service delivery models (Dick, 1985; Greenan, 1982).

Summary

A credible body of information and research findings is just beginning to be developed in the literature. This information does seem to predict some success for the development of academic and vocational service delivery models and

materials by creative and dedicated professionals in the near future (Sarns, 1986). But the synthesis and testing of what has been published, especially in the light of the guidelines mandated by Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act remains to be pursued (Sedita, 1980). This self-evaluation within the field of learning disabilities should be a major activity of professionals in special and vocational education who are concerned about the needs of LD individuals and their families (Gerber & Mellard, 1985).

The one major point of agreement developed in the literature developed so far is that the effects of a learning disability do not lessen or become less damaging as the child becomes as adult (Buchanan & Wolf, 1986). Instead these effects become more complex and harmful unless addressed in a consistent, productive way.

The professionals who are currently providing services to adolescents and adults with learning disabilities themselves have admitted that they are unsure at times of how to meet the needs of this complex population (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1983).

Other voices are actively requesting that innovative transition models and information be developed and disseminated as soon as possible.

For example, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association has underscored this recently with a position paper title "Adults with Learning Disabilities: A Call to Action" (ASHA, 1985). In another example, the Preliminary Report of the ACLD (Association for Children and Adults with Learning Disabilities) Vocational Committee's Survey of LD Adults (1982) reports that the most important issue cited by the participants (81%) was the need for viable vocational education opportunities and career guidance for both adolescents and adults. Providing effective transition services for LD

individuals is a significant problem that consumers and service providers want to see addressed.

In conclusion, the problem of transition for learning disabled individuals from secondary to postsecondary settings is a multi-faceted dilemma. As Adelman and Taylor (1985) emphatically state, the case for improved theory and research within the area of learning disabilities must continue to be addressed if the credibility of the field is to survive.

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